

# OSR Journal of Student Research

---

Volume 1

Article 6

---

2013

## Perceived Social Norms and Health Behaviors: Are College Drinking Behaviors Mediated by University Attachment?

John C. Wheeler

*California State University, San Bernardino*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/osr>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wheeler, John C. (2013) "Perceived Social Norms and Health Behaviors: Are College Drinking Behaviors Mediated by University Attachment?," *OSR Journal of Student Research*: Vol. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/osr/vol1/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Student Research at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSR Journal of Student Research by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

## Perceived Social Norms and Health Behaviors: Are College Drinking Behaviors Mediated by University Attachment?

Jordyn C. Wheeler

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess school attachment in college students and alcohol use. High perceptions of peer alcohol use were expected to be positively correlated with rates of individual student use. Also, as students reported higher rates of attachment to their university, rates of alcohol use would decrease. Furthermore, it was expected that affiliation with a fraternity or sorority would alter the relationship between university attachment and alcohol use. Existing data from LaChausse's (2012) CSUSB Student Health Survey was used; 311 participants completed the survey, which included measures of current alcohol and other drug use, perceived CSUSB student use, and ratings of university attachment. Pearson correlation coefficients indicated significant results supporting two of the hypotheses. Perceptions of peer alcohol use were predictive

of individual use. There was also a positive linear relationship between fraternity and sorority members' rates of university attachment and alcohol use, as well as a negative linear relationship between non-affiliated student's rates of university attachment and alcohol use. The results indicate that higher rates of university attachment are related to lower levels of alcohol use.

### Author Interview

---

#### Which professors (if any) have helped you in your research?

Dr. Robert LaChausse.

#### What are your research interests?

My research interests are social psychology, health behaviors, and drug and alcohol abuse.

#### What are your plans after earning your degree? What is your ultimate career goal?

I will be applying to doctoral programs in social psychology to further my research career. I plan to continue my career doing research in the field of social psychology, and secure a position at a university, where I can teach courses in my field.

**Keywords:** *University Attachment, Alcohol use, College Students, Fraternity and Sorority*

## Introduction

Drinking patterns among college students have long been considered problematic with trends steadily increasing in recent years. For example, 45% of undergraduates reported they engaged in binge drinking in the previous month (Cox & Bates, 2011; Crawford & Novak, 2010). In 2001, alcohol was involved in more than 1,700 deaths of U.S. college students and 500,000 unintentional injuries (LaBrie, Hummer, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2010). The consequences of alcohol use do not end with the involved individual, but subsequently affect other students, and communities of the campuses (LaBrie et al., 2010).

Social Norms Theory suggests that individual behavior is largely influenced by the perceptions of behaviors of their peer group (LaBrie et al., 2010). Considerable research has applied this theory to predict alcohol use for college students, demonstrating a strong relationship of perceived peer drinking norms influencing behavior (Cox & Bates, 2011; Crawford & Novak, 2010; Halim, Hasking & Allen, 2012; LaBrie et al., 2010). Particularly, these studies show that individuals who perceive the majority of their peers are drinking in large quantities and approve of doing so, are more likely to drink more themselves (Halim et al., 2012). This perception is especially dangerous because research from 100 U.S. colleges indicates that students often overestimate alcohol use of their peers and subsequently also increase their individual consumption (Crawford & Novak, 2010; Halim et al., 2012; LaBrie et al., 2010; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005).

Another predictor of student behavior is derived from measuring students' attachment to their school (France, Finney, & Swerdzewski, 2010). France et al.'s (2010), in the study of university attachment and development of the University Attachment Scale, identified a lack of research on attachment at the university level. Nevertheless, France et al. reported school attachment to be positively associated with behavioral and educational success such as academic achievement, effort, and degree of academic value. Student perceptions of connectedness to their university might also have an effect on alcohol and other drug (ATOD) use.

Despite the paucity of research in this area, the relationship between school attachment and health risk behaviors has been established among high school students (Dever et al., 2012). For example, Dever et al.'s (2012) study found that "school bonding" was correlated with later onset and lower averages of substance use. Moreover, this relationship is much stronger for high school students than for lower grade students. As a result, it would be reasonable to assume that as students transition from high school to college, that this concept of school connectedness would have an equal or greater effect on their health behaviors.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between school bonding (i.e. university attachment) and alcohol use among college students. It is hypothesized that the students' perceptions of social norms will influence their own drinking behaviors. Specifically, higher perceptions of alcohol use will be positively correlated with individual alcohol use. It is also hypothesized that there is a negative correlation between university attachment and alcohol use among college students.

## Methods

This study uses existing data from the CSUSB Student Health Survey (LaChausse, 2012). Surveys were distributed to a random sample of students at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). Participation in the survey was voluntary. The CSUSB Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this study. The sample includes 82 (26.2%) male and 229 (73.2%) female college students (N=311) between the ages of 18 and 57 from CSUSB. Of the participating students, 29.1% were Non-Hispanic White, 42.8% Hispanic/Latino, 11.2% African American, 11.5% Asian, and .3% Native American. Twenty of the participating students reported being a member of a fraternity or sorority at CSUSB. The CSUSB Student Health Survey included items measuring student demographics, safety and violence, lifetime ATOD use, ATOD use in the past month (current

use) and perceived CSUSB student use, sexual health behaviors, behaviors related to nutrition, exercise, and physical activity, university attachment, and stress. This study used the measures of current ATOD use, and perceived CSUSB student ATOD use, as well as university attachment using the University Attachment Scale (France et al., 2010). The University Attachment Scale asks questions like “*How accurate would it be to describe you as a typical CSUSB student?*” on a Likert scale, with satisfactory reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.84$ ) (France et al., 2010).

## Results

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated examining the relationship between university attachment and current alcohol use. No significant relationship was found ( $r(288) = -.049, p = .40$ ). As a result, university attachment is not related to the degree of current alcohol use. A second Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the relationship between university attachment and current alcohol use for fraternity and sorority members. A strong positive correlation was found ( $r(16) = .567, p = .01$ ), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. That is, as fraternity and sorority members reported higher rates of university attachment, their rates of current alcohol use also increased. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between university attachment and current alcohol use for non-sorority/fraternity members. A negative correlation was found ( $r(270) = -.13, p = .03$ ), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. In contrast to students that were members of a fraternity or sorority, non-members reported higher levels of university attachment, and also reported lower levels of current alcohol use.

## Discussion

The results of this study confirm that higher levels of university attachment were related to lower levels of current alcohol use. Student’s perceptions of peer alcohol use were predictive of individual alcohol use. The

analyses indicated that rates of university attachment were not significantly correlated with rates of alcohol use. Alternatively, there was a positive linear relationship for affiliated student’s rates of university attachment and alcohol use, as well as a negative linear relationship for non-affiliated student’s rates of university attachment and alcohol use. This means that as affiliated students report higher levels of attachment, their alcohol use also increases. However, for non-affiliated students, as level of attachment increases, alcohol use decreases. It is probable that because opposing trends are seen in these two sub-groups, it caused the non-significant results between university attachment and alcohol use.

Research indicates that feelings of connectedness have shown a tendency of individuals to behave in accordance with dominant norms (Hummer, LaBrie, & Pedersen, 2012). This association may explain the trend seen with alcohol for fraternity and sorority students. If alcohol consumption is accepted and common within these student groups, the individual behavior is then sanctioned. In this circumstance, high levels of attachment or connection may influence individuals to consume more alcohol.

Alcohol trends among college students are a public health concern. Not only is it harmful for the student, in terms of academic impairment, injury, or addiction, but it also affects other students and the communities of the campuses. Often these effects are seen in form of low graduation rates and high attrition rates. This research distinguishes patterns of alcohol use among college students; for example, fraternity and sorority members are more likely to drink. This information can be used in conjunction with other research to shape prevention and intervention programs to reduce risk for the college population.

## Implications

This research can be used to report accurate rates of drinking in the college community to convey the true norm, and give students the opportunity to adjust their perceptions, and thus their own behavior. It can also be used to implement programs to increase

feelings of connectedness and student involvement on campus. Such programs may tackle, in part, the issue some universities have with graduation and attrition rates. Campuses need to increase connectedness for their students, but in appropriate ways, such that they avoid increasing alcohol trends like those seen within the fraternity and sorority groups. Effective programs could determine appropriate forms of increasing university bonding and also reduce rates of student alcohol use.

### Future Studies

Future research on this topic may examine these relationships of attachment and alcohol use in other students groups (i.e. student government, athletic clubs, academic clubs) to identify and other possible trends in the subsets of the college population. This information will allow universities to better regulate the patterns of alcohol use.

### References

- Cox, J. M., & Bates, S. C. (2011). Referent group proximity, social norms, and context: alcohol use in a low-use environment. *Journal of American College Health*, 59(4), 252-259. doi:10.1080/07448481.2010.502192
- Crawford, L. A., & Novak, K. B. (2010). Beliefs about alcohol and the college experience as moderators of the effects of perceived drinking norms on student alcohol use. *Journal of Alcohol & Drug Education*, 54(3), 69-86.
- Dever, B., Schulenberg, J., Dworkin, J., O'Malley, P., Kloska, D., & Bachman, J. (2012). Predicting risk-taking with and without substance use: the effects of parental monitoring, school bonding, and sports participation. *Prevention Science*, 13(6), 605-615. doi:10.1007/s11121-012-0288-z
- France, M. K., Finney, S. J., & Swerdzewski, P. (2010). Students' group and member attachment to their university: a construct validity study of the university attachment scale. *Educational & Psychological Measurement*, 70(3), 440-458. doi:10.1177/0013164409344510
- Halim, A., Hasking, P., & Allen, F. (2012). The role of social drinking motives in the relationship between social norms and alcohol consumption. *Addictive Behaviors*, 37(12), 1335-1341. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2012.07.004
- Hummer, J., LaBrie, J., Pedersen, E. (2012). First impressions on the scene: the influence of the immediate reference group on incoming first-year students' alcohol behavior and attitudes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(1), 149-162.
- LaBrie, J., Hummer, J., Neighbors, C., & Larimer, M. (2010). Whose opinion matters? The relationship between injunctive norms and alcohol consequences in college students. *Addictive Behaviors*, 35(4), 343-349. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2009.12.003
- LaChausse, R. (2012). *CSUSB Student Health Survey* [Data file and code book].
- Perkins, H., Haines, M. P., & Rice, R. (2005). Misperceiving the college drinking norm and related problems: a nationwide study of exposure to prevention information, perceived norms and student alcohol misuse. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 470-478.